



Pitts, F. H. (2016). Popular delusions: Corbynism constructs its people. *Open Democracy*, (2 August 2016).

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The citation for the published article is as follows: Pitts, F. H., 2016. Popular delusions: Corbynism constructs its people. *Open Democracy*. 2nd August.

Popular delusions: Corbynism constructs its people

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Open Democracy

2nd August 2016

Last week, the *Economist* journalist Natasha Loder shared a train carriage with Jeremy Corbyn. She eavesdropped as Corbyn and his staffers stressed over his leadership campaign slogans. The choice came down to two: 'Putting people first', or 'people powered politics'. The latter won. But the common theme? 'People'. The same 'people' that pops up, inexplicably, in the moniker of Peoples Momentum, the organisation otherwise known as Jeremy for Labour Ltd. Corbynism may lay claim to a politics of the real, the immediate, the concrete. But the people to which Corbynism addresses itself is totally abstract, a mere fugazi.

The idea of the people is now as pervasive on the left as the idea of class once was. Its pervasiveness owes to a surge in left populism. With Corbynism, the UK caught what swept Europe post-crisis. But continental populism's successes highlight the divergence. Syriza carefully constructed a popular platform through practical solidarity work. Podemos harnessed media messaging to articulate a popular project around points of popular grievance. Insofar as people power is possible within capitalism at all, these interventions worked.

But Corbynism summons up a people it has played no such part in piecing together. As Nick Cohen writes, when Corbyn claims to be 'authentically reflecting "the people"', he speaks only of 'that tiny section of "the people" who pay £3 and click on a link to show they agree with him'. Corbyn won the leadership surfing no wave of popular struggle. And, as Matt Bolton has pointed out, he may pass from it in much the same manner. 'The people' is a placeholder for something that exists only as pure potential. But, a spectral presence at the head of a virtual movement, Corbyn wields no ability to realise it. Slogans, as Corbyn's challenger Owen Smith himself sloganizes, are not enough. We need solutions.

But the people's non-existence does not diminish its political effect on the faithful. It rallies supporters around a rhetorical perch on which to rest their laurels. This is best seen in the logic of the 99%. On one hand, this gives the perfect alibi. When you're losing, who do you blame? The 1% of course, who fix reality against the popular will. Conspiracy theories provide a convenient excuse to avoid the complex thinking and activity necessary to comprehend and change a world where power has no central point. On the other hand, an added sense of comfort rewards those sharing Corbyn's conviction that 'things can, and they will, change'. This says: the 1% may command incredible power right now. But through sheer force of numbers, our victory is inevitable. Others just need to come around to it. This optimism induces both an intellectual and political paralysis.

It gains a sophisticated veneer in Paul Mason's contention that Corbynism represents a 'counter-power'. Mason follows an Italian leftist tradition that started out seeing working-class revolt driving capitalist change. By the 21st century, the working class made way for a 'multitude' whose desires determine world order. So globalisation, for instance, reacts to the border-hopping boundlessness of uncontainable masses. The idea of the multitude as counter-power consoles us that the world is our creation. And because we are good people, it promotes a Panglossian belief that all is for the best, and we live in the best of all possible worlds. It belongs to us, and owes us a living.

So there's a two-sided political utility to being part of the 'people'. On the one hand, it reassures you that you're losing because of a powerful elite. On the other, it confirms that you'll win in the end regardless. Whichever they choose – conspiracy or teleology – the popular sleep safe in the knowledge there's nothing else left to do – like win elections, for instance. So, staring down Brexit, Corbyn's defenders elide the peril of a rudderless parliamentary opposition. Just sit still and shine.

Either route affords false resources of hope and anger. Things aren't as bad as conspiracy suggests, but are much worse than the teleology foretells. The rosy hue with which populism endows the present is belied by its realities. At least some of the blame rests in an abandonment of a proper analysis of capitalism. Populism reduces class analysis to the posing of an elite against the people. This personalises power and forgets that class is a relation between people rather than a category in which one sits.

Social change is thereby seen as a question of putting the people in charge of structures the elite control at present. But this ignores the forms of social domination embedded in these structures. Populism obscures how the class relation binds elites to a form of abstract rule as surely as it does the masses.

Constructing a people here substitutes for a critique of class society, however much some see populism as a way past it.

Pinning their hopes upon a succession of popular subjects, of late the left has wended a strange trajectory. Post-crisis, horizontalism sought to 'change the world without taking power'. Then things started getting serious. Shrugging off disdain for the state, winning elections and wielding power became the aim. This is reflected in the new vogue for big thinking on the UK left. There has been a Podemos-like rediscovery of the concept of hegemony and how to build it. Dreams abound of seizing state power to implement postcapitalism or so-called 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism'.

The radical left accommodation of statist solutions would have been unthinkable as tents sprung up outside St Pauls in 2011. In some ways, it shows the adulthood of the Occupy generation. In others, it is not entirely without illusions. A reflex against Occupy's failure, the new verticalism still bears its foreshortened class critique. Against the 'elite', the 'people' stands in as the alibi for a state politics that lacks a social basis in class struggles and institutions. Without this basis, one must be imagined. Hence: Corbynism constructs its people.

Contradictions should be embraced by those interested in power. But among left populists, their proliferation is telling. Curiously, the statist turn often couples with fierce resistance to political calculations around Corbyn's electoral credibility. Any sop to political convention is sullied as elite sophistry. Those fixated on regulating a tech-utopia into existence find themselves defending losing elections. There are bigger fish to fry, like creating an as-yet ill-defined social movement. But their political strategies hinge upon constructing a 'people'. This cannot happen as long as Corbynism obsesses with party leadership, certain that its people already exists. The populist paralysis pervades.

The theoretical and strategic twists and turns of the left express the pursuit of a popular subject that cannot exist in a world criss-crossed by the class relation. Nothing unites us beyond the abstract economic rule to which we are all subject, elites included. A unified 'people' may spring from its destruction, but cannot preexist it. Better to stake a politics on what exists now than what does not. As Marx wrote, quoting Aesop: 'hic Rhodus, hic salta'.

Corbynism constitutes the crisis of at least one thread of post-2008 left politics. With it, the left finds itself stuck between protecting a precarious parliamentary leadership and building a grassroots social movement, at the expense of both. And its people is still nowhere to be seen.

In the *FT*, Jon Cruddas recently compared Labour's competing claims for legitimacy with the German left in 1918. On the cusp of Weimar, the SPD's Ebert claimed his legitimacy from the electorate. Luxemburg and Kautsky staked theirs in class power: workers councils, factory committees. Corbyn has no such social basis on which to stake his. The SPD-Spartacist split resulted in a political polarisation. A void opened. Today, a Labour split could see one side listing to the left, untethered from concrete conditions. That way awaits a void no imagined people can fill.